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The Smile

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The Smile

TALKATIVE, OUTGOING AND OPINIONATED, ALEXANDER STUBB IS AN ATYPICAL

He's a self-confessed institutional "nerd," happily admitting that European Union directives really do turn him on.

With his large, gleaming teeth — in Finland, he is known as "The Smile" — and a penchant for brightly colored shirts, it's certainly hard not to notice him.

Alexander Stubb is one of the rising stars of the current 732-member European Parliament, a Young Turk who is destined for the very top. Who says so? Well, William Wallace, his former professor at the London School of Economics, for a start.

"Alex really is a golden boy," Wallace says. "He's very bright, well-organized and has got the world at his feet."

A more atypical Finn than the 37-year-old Stubb would be hard to find, says his countryman Timo Ranta, a counselor at the Finnish Permanent Representation in Brussels. He has known Stubb for 10 years, since they both worked at the Finnish foreign affairs ministry in Helsinki.

"Finnish men tend to be very shy and quiet," says Ranta. "Alex is the opposite. He's very visible, tall, talkative and stands out in a crowd. He has certainly lost whatever Finnish inhibitions he ever had."

Stubb, a 1993 Furman alumnus who at Commencement received the Bradshaw-Feaster Medal as the outstanding male graduate, was born in Helsinki in an apartment where his mother, Christel, and his father, Göran, still live. His 70-year-old father is a former hockey player and is known as "Mr. Ice Hockey" in Finland. He has a brother, Nicolas, who is two years younger and works in the information technology industry.

Although he has lived in Finland for only two years since 1989, Stubb remains close to each, saying they are "more like friends" than family.

Stubb inherited a love of hockey and used to wonder why his father didn't encourage him to pursue a professional career in the sport. "My father was only 15 when his own father died and he subsequently had to stop his studies prematurely to start work," says Stubb. "Dad has since told me he was determined that, unlike him, his sons would complete their studies."

As a youngster Stubb was a sports nut. He loved golf (he represented the Finnish national team) and, despite his father's advice, did not give up the idea of a career in the game.

At the age of 21 — after serving 12 months' military service — he found what seemed to be an ideal compromise: a golf scholarship to Furman, which, in theory, would have enabled him to study for a business degree and at the same time pursue his ambition of becoming a golf professional.

"However, after just three weeks I realized I wasn't going to make the grade," he says. "I also realized that macro-economics was not my cup of tea."

He dropped out of the business course but stayed on to complete a bachelor's degree in political science and insists

he has much to thank the American university system for. The four-year spell in the United States was, he says, the "turning point" in his life — the period, ironically, when his passion for European affairs (matched only by his love of Diet Coke) was first awakened.

Languages have always been an important part of his life. He started school studying in Finnish, then switched halfway through to a Swedish-speaking school. He later did his university degrees in French and English.

The Stubb home boasts an interesting language regime: His 3-year-old daughter, Emilie, and his son, Oliver (born in April 2004), speak Swedish with him, English with their mother, Finnish with their housekeeper and French at school.

When Stubb returned to Europe from the United States he still had a gap in his armory: an inability to speak French, something he soon corrected with a short spell at the Sorbonne.

Next stop was a master's degree in European affairs at the College of Europe in Bruges. There he met Suzanne, now his wife, over breakfast in the dormitory they shared. She was taking a law course, and Stubb says he was immediately "smitten." They were married seven years ago and now live in Genval, near Brussels. She is English and works in the Belgian city as a competition lawyer for an international firm.

In 1999, Stubb moved to Brussels as an assistant to Finland's ambassador to the European Union to work as a civil servant. He has since been an advisor to then European Commission president Romano Prodi and a member of the Finnish negotiating team for the intergovernmental conference in 2000, which led to the Nice Treaty (which dealt with the expansion of the EU).

A Finnish friend says that during this period Stubb acquired a reputation for somewhat unconventional negotiating techniques. He says, "I, and others, often saw him naked in a sauna conducting detailed negotiations on the intergovernmental conference and discussing the merits of such things as qualified majority voting."

Alex Ellis, a member of the cabinet of José Manuel Barroso, the current European Commission president, says that, in or out of saunas, Stubb is "good company" and adds: "With Alex, what you see is what you get."

Stubb himself admits to being too rash and outspoken for his own good at times. It was after the five-day Nice summit in December 2000, the longest in EU history, that he incurred the wrath of the French by criticizing France's six-month presidency of the Union.

"He accused France of being interested only in looking after its own interests. This naturally angered the French to the point where their officials boycotted him for a spell," recalls a source at the Finnish representation.

BY MARTIN BANKS

FINN — AND AN UP-AND-COMING STAR IN EUROPEAN POLITICS.

On another occasion, while he was still employed in the Finnish foreign ministry, Stubb is said to have upset his own country's foreign minister. His detractors also say he is too much of a self-publicist, with some Finnish members of his own political party apparently resentful of the bucketfuls of publicity he attracts.

A Finnish journalist said: "After his family the thing Stubb loves most is publicity. He can't get enough of it. The Finnish media love him but on the few occasions he gets a bad press, he reacts badly. He was once jokingly compared, with his big teeth, to a squirrel, and he didn't like it one bit."

Stubb ran a highly successful, and exhausting, 48-day campaign in the run-up to the June 2004 European elections. He surprised many by polling the second highest number of votes (115,225) in Finland.

Piia-Noora Kauppi, a fellow Finnish member of Parliament who urged him to stand for office, says that Stubb "has helped change the image of MEPs in Finland." Stubb sits on four Parliamentary committees. Perhaps unusual for a member of the center-right European People's Party-European Democrats, he is also vice chair of the gay and lesbian rights group.

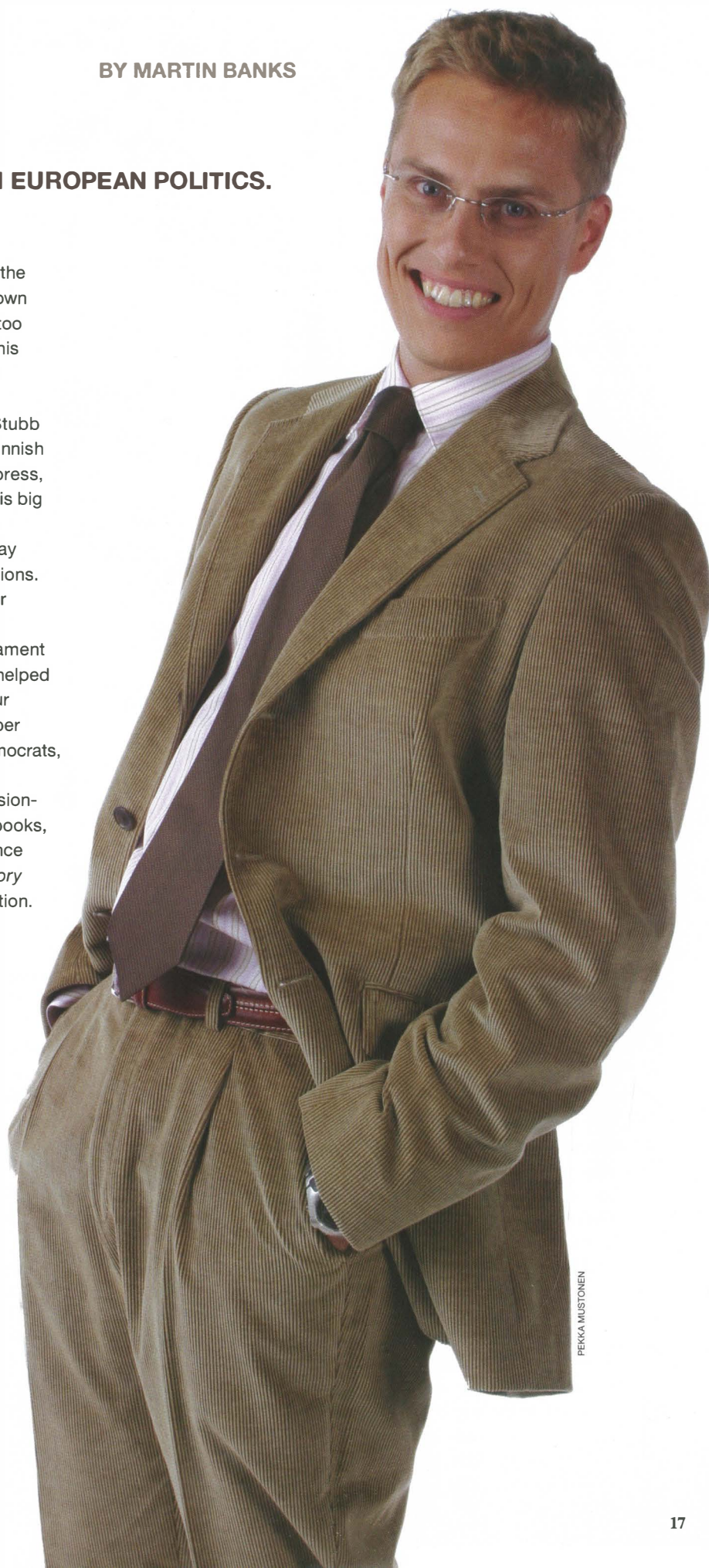
This civil servant-turned-politician still teaches occasionally at the College of Europe and has published several books, including, with Brent Nelsen of the Furman political science department, *The European Union: Readings on the Theory and Practice of European Integration*, now in its third edition. Stubb also writes a daily blog diary on the Internet, yet still finds time to take his children to school every day — and be home by 7 p.m. While professing a particular dislike for the backstabbing in politics, he describes life as an MEP as his "dream job."

Reijo Kemppinen, head of the European Commission's representation in London, has known Stubb for 10 years and says, "Alex is one of the most effective, determined and visionary politicians I've ever seen at such a relatively young age."

Sir Stephen Wall, the former Tony Blair advisor and United Kingdom permanent representative in Brussels, puts things differently. "Alex was the first Finn I got to know well in Brussels," says Wall. "So it took me a while to realize that all Finns were not extrovert, opinionated and politically incorrect." ●

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For more on Stubb, visit the Web at www.alexstubb.com.



PEKKA MUSTONEN